



Why They Leave

Lack of respect, NCLB, and under-funding—in a topsy-turvy profession, what can make today's teachers stay?

By Cynthia Kopkowski

One afternoon, the public address system at Janet Griggs' school—where administrators have done away with paper memos—crackles with the announcement that staff heading to impending team meetings should refer to the room assignments listed in the e-mail they received that day.

Confused teachers wander the halls confirming with one another that nobody got the e-mail. The PA system stirs to life again, informing teachers that administrators just realized they never sent it. The disembodied voice then starts giving instructions about the meetings, sending teachers scrambling for paper to write it all down. Administrators later send the e-mail after most of the meetings have adjourned.

If it were a Dilbert comic strip, readers would chuckle. But when what's at stake is the professionalism of educators like Griggs, a 61-year-old communication arts teacher in St. Louis, Missouri, and the quality of instruction for the children they want so desperately to teach, well, it's no laughing matter. Yet every day, workplace conditions are sometimes so surreal they make leaving the profession seem like their best or only option.

Nationally, the average turnover for all teachers is 17 percent, and in urban school districts specifically, the number jumps to 20 percent, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future proffers starker numbers, estimating that one-third of all new teachers leave after three years, and 46 percent are gone within five years.

Their departure through what researchers call the "revolving door" that's spinning ever faster—the commission estimates teacher attrition has grown by 50 percent over the past 15 years—costs roughly \$7 billion a year, as districts and states recruit, hire, and try to retain new teachers. "There is this idea that we can solve the teaching shortage with recruitment," says commission President Tom Carroll. "What we have is a retention crisis." Likening it to continually dumping sand into a bucket with holes in the bottom, Carroll says, "as fast as [the districts] are moving teachers into schools, they're leaving."

Marta Nielson, an elementary school teacher in Vista, California, is leaving. Her current classroom is packed with up to 38 students. There are no aides and the obsessive focus on cramming for standardized tests means "an atmosphere of constant stress and fear," she says. The result? She's leaving at the end of the year for a small private school.

While Baby Boomer retirement is a factor in the current turnover rates, it is dwarfed by those leaving for troubling reasons like Nielson's. Take the U.S. Department of Education's 2005 examination of departures. Thirty percent of teachers left in 2003–04 because of retirement, but 56 percent left citing job dissatisfaction and a desire to find an entirely new career.

"The whole retirement thing has been consistently exaggerated," says University of Pennsylvania researcher Richard Ingersoll. Policymakers and administrators blame retirement in a case of "wrong diagnosis and wrong prescription," he says. "You can't do a whole lot about retirement, but you can do something about the way schools are organized, operated, and managed."

What is it about the day-to-day experiences of teachers that has so many heading for the door each year? Researchers across the country devoted much time during the past two years polling the group they call "the leavers." Last year's report from the National Center for Education Statistics outlined a series of reasons why that group is swelling, based on interviews with more than 7,000 current and former teachers. Some states have conducted their own polling of tens of thousands of members.

NCLB Mandates

You Mean You Didn't Sign On to Teach Bubble-Filling?

State standardized testing preparation is in full swing for Griggs and her colleagues. An administrator sends an e-mail late one day demanding that the seventh-grade teachers immediately respond to her with a list of their "power standards." Griggs stares at the computer screen. She doesn't have a clue what a "power standard" is or how it's going to help her students. She turns off the computer and heads home for the night.

It's one thing to have to labor daily under the weight of testing and un-funded accountability standards wrought by the so-called No Child Left Behind law (NCLB). It's another to know that they spell the end of your teaching career.

Elizabeth (whose name has been changed to protect her identity), a young elementary special education teacher in New Jersey, knows that she will leave the profession because of what she sees as the unfair demands placed on her by the law. Her classroom is increasingly loaded with students and the benchmarks for those students are creeping up senselessly. "They are in special education for a reason," she says. There will always be children who perform below others on standardized tests, but under the current accountability mandates, their teachers "are looked at like we're not doing a good job, even if we've been doing good work with them," she says. "I say to myself more and more often that I don't know how much longer I can do this." Last fall, she sat down with her fiancé, reviewed their financial plans, and came up with an answer: not more than five years at the current rate of pay.

It's not just test scores. After NCLB was enacted, Arizona schools sent home letters with all students in classes taught by those suddenly derided for not being "highly qualified" under the law. "It was one of the most demoralizing incidents we've seen," says Arizona Education Association President John Wright, who fielded calls from teachers in tears afterward. "The pressure to meet these unrealistic testing expectations breaks down teacher morale, and in too many communities, parents and leaders are not affording teachers professional respect."

Fallout from the accountability movement will naturally affect retention rates, says Penn researcher Ingersoll. "We want to increase accountability, and there's nothing wrong with that, but it doesn't make sense to hold people accountable for things over which they have no control," (like students' disadvantages before they even walk through the classroom door) he says. "Management 101 says you're going to drive out the best if you do that."

Lack of Influence and Respect

Educators Should Be Seen and Not Heard

As open house night approaches, Janet Griggs and her fellow teaching team members determine they should speak to parents as a group to better explain their interdependent strategy. An administrator arrives at a meeting where they're putting the finishing touches on this plan and tells them they must stay in their own classrooms during the open house to show off their rooms.

Instead of a dynamic presentation giving the educators a chance to demonstrate the scope of their work with the children, they end up meeting only for a few minutes with parents who wander through their rooms. When the event is over, Griggs sinks into her chair and wonders if anyone will ever listen to teachers' ideas.

In survey after survey, teachers say they want a sense that they are making progress in their career, that they can extend their knowledge and expertise beyond the walls of their own classroom, and that they are being valued, says Harvard's Johnson. "It can be very demoralizing if people believe the world thinks they are not smart and doesn't value their work." Yet that's the message reinforced daily for educators nationwide.

Ingersoll saw it happen himself, when he made the transition from teaching high school to becoming a college professor. "It was day to night," he says, laughing incredulously. "We have a societal image there that this is not worthy of the prestige of being a lawyer, doctor, or an engineer. That's going to make recruitment and retention difficult."

Even within the profession, educators all too often feel their expertise is discounted. Take Elizabeth. Working with her special education students, she realized the mandated reading program was ineffective. But she got nowhere when trying to explain that to administrators.

Whether the teachers arrived fresh from college or from another career, the problem is often the same when it comes to lack of influence, says Carroll of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. "After they've been teaching a few years, they don't see a rewarding career path ahead of them. The only way to advance is to leave and go into administration or just leave altogether."



Student discipline

They're Your Problem

While many of the students in Tammy McCartney's Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, middle school classroom were attentive, more than a handful preferred to horseplay and wander the room.

Administrators signed off on her plan to place troublesome students at an isolated desk in the corner, but that became a pipe dream in a room so crammed with students that one needed to turn sideways to walk the aisles. Administrators discouraged sending students to the office. When one absolutely needed to be sent, the teacher had to first stop and fill out a referral form, and even then the student was usually sent right back to the classroom, his or her behavior unchanged.

Compounding the problem were phone calls to parents that yielded indifference or blatant animosity. McCartney's breaking point came the day that a boy put a sweatshirt on as a pair of pants and waddled around the classroom, creating havoc. When she called his house, his mother said he must have just been cold, and hung up. "I said, 'I think I've had enough,'" McCartney, 29, says. She quit last spring.

Unmanageable discipline problems mean more than a headache in the classroom. For teachers like McCartney, they erode desire to invest time and energy in lesson plans that make the content come alive for students. Preservice training is often of little help, too. "We spent very little, if any, time on discipline," McCartney says of the training she received the summer before entering the classroom. "I entered the profession completely unprepared for discipline problems."

Deciding to leave devastated McCartney, a once optimistic and enthusiastic young teacher. "Gosh, it was a really big defeat," she says, letting out a deep breath. "Teaching is important, but I got to the point where I wasn't willing to sacrifice so much anymore."

Underfunded and Underpaid

Follow the Money...and You'll Find a Lack of Respect

A district administrator has decreed that worksheets, like memos, are verboten at Griggs' school. When she absolutely has to have materials copied for the classroom, she is required to give them to a secretary with a request form. That form is sent to a principal for approval. If it's approved and the teacher doesn't need more than 100 copies, they are made. If she needs more than 100 copies, the print job is sent out of the building to the district copy center and then shipped back to the school.

When Sherry Mann started teaching fifth grade this year in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, the 39-year-old career changer was floored by how often she found herself reaching into her own pocket to pay for classroom supplies. "My husband is a software developer. He would never have to purchase his own paper." Thus far, she estimates she's spent roughly \$1,000 on classroom essentials. (She's not alone. About 8 percent of teachers spend that annually and the average teacher spends at least \$433, according to a 2003 NEA Research study. And education support professionals spend about \$168, according to a 2007 NEA Research report.

Feeling that she doesn't have all the tools or the time she needs to do her job the way the self-confessed "perfectionist" would like weighs on Mann. "It's really depressing sometimes. You get to the point where you just can't handle it."

The issue of inadequate pay arises when educators like Mann, battered by a slew of such obstacles, grow increasingly dissatisfied. They begin to look around, says Susan Moore Johnson, a researcher with the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "Other lines of work offer higher pay, and when there's not such a stigma attached to leaving one job and going to another, the pay elsewhere becomes more attractive." Elizabeth, the young New Jersey teacher, puts it this way: "You see your friends coming out of college getting jobs making the same or more than you do for less work, and it's tempting to go find a job that pays more and is more relaxing."

The bottom line for many educators, especially new ones, is that their income doesn't pay the rent and bills. "Teachers have to be able to afford to teach," says Johnson, "Even for the most committed, the pay has to be sufficient to live a reasonable, middle class life."

Figuring out how to tackle pay problems has proven tricky in states where officials have focused largely on bonuses to woo new teachers. South Carolina offered an \$18,000 bonus for teachers to come to its weakest schools, but because of a lack of administrative support, poor working conditions, and inadequate induction and mentoring, only 20 percent of the teachers sought took the bonuses and stuck it out. In Massachusetts, a \$20,000 signing bonus program failed for similar reasons. When recipients figured out what they'd actually net in bonus money over the program's four-year term, they often decided it wasn't worth it, says Johnson.